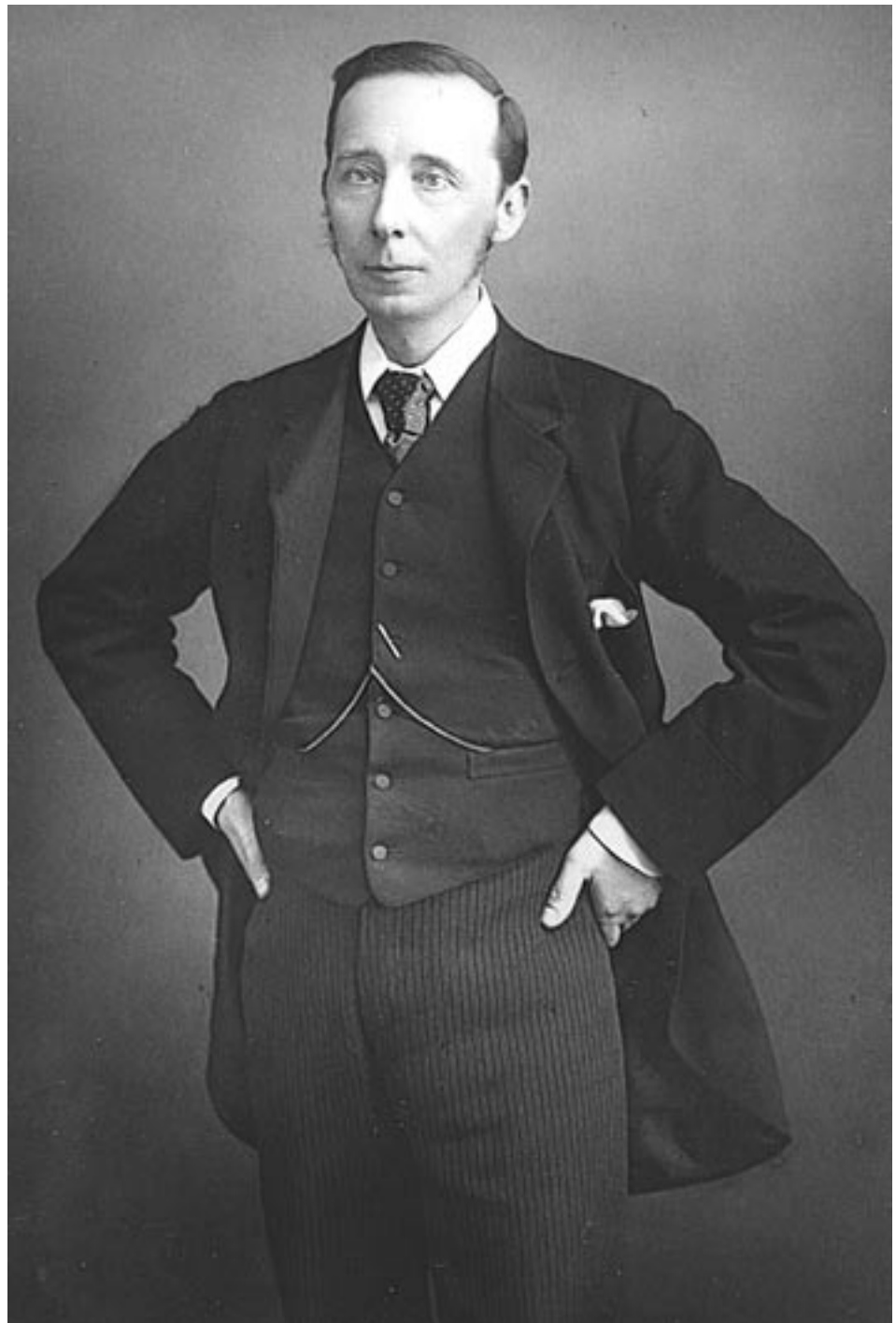


**Biography of Sir
Arthur Herbert
Dyke Acland
(1847–1926)**

A LOST PRI

Dr J. Graham Jones looks at the career of the Oxford don and administrator who became the individualistic, radical, left-wing Liberal MP for Rotherham between 1885 and 1899. He served as Minister of Education in Gladstone's fourth administration, from 1892 until 1895, but retired from active politics at the relatively very young age of 52. Today largely forgotten, his achievements in the field of education were real and he was one of the few Liberal 'rising star' politicians whose reputation was actually enhanced by participation in the last Gladstone administration. Like so many talented politicians, he may indeed have been 'a lost prime minister'.



Sir Arthur Herbert Dyke Acland in 1894; photo W & D Downey (National Portrait Gallery, London)

ME MINISTER?

Arthur Herbert Dyke Acland was born at Holnite near Porlock on 13 October 1847, the second son of the Rt Hon. Sir Thomas Dyke Acland of Killerton, Devon, eleventh baronet of Columb John (and one of the largest landowners in England). He was also the nephew of Sir Henry Wentworth Acland, the long-serving, distinguished Regius Professor of Medicine at Oxford.

The family took special pride in its West Country origins, tracing its descent in the area back to the time of Henry II, and also in its tradition of public service through many generations. In 1857 Acland's father, together with his close friend Dr Frederick Temple, was responsible for designing and implementing an examination for boys in middle-class schools which proved to be a milestone in the history of secondary education in England. It was the genesis of the Local Examinations first adopted by Oxford University and later by Cambridge. Acland thus spent his boyhood in an atmosphere of intense educational activity.

In 1861 he entered Rugby School where Frederick Temple, 'that rugged and powerful character' who was later to become the Archbishop of Canterbury,¹ had served as headmaster since 1858. Temple and Acland's father were both members of the famous Schools Inquiry Commission of 1864–67. But it was

a reflection of the tardy progress of educational reform in nineteenth-century England that it ultimately fell to Acland himself, after 1892, to press home the real meaning of that commission's report in the House of Commons. His years at Rugby served to buttress and reinforce the liberalism instilled into Acland from his earliest days by his father who, although he was a close personal friend of Liberal Prime Minister William Ewart Gladstone (who had begun his career on the Conservative benches), remained a Conservative until he retired from parliament in 1857.

In 1866 Acland, like his father before him, went on to Christ Church, Oxford, and soon developed a keen interest in economic and political questions – savouring the companionship of a number of like-minded university dons and fellow students, who came together to form the 'Inner Circle' or the 'Inner Ring'. A wide range of peripheral pursuits meant that, although of clear first-class potential, he graduated with only second-class honours in Classical Moderations in 1868 and again in the final school of Law and Modern History in 1870. This was in stark contrast to his father, who had been an Oxford 'double first' and was elected a Fellow of All Souls.

Upon graduation, Acland stayed on at Oxford, becoming a lecturer and tutor at Keble College, which had just opened its doors. He was ordained a deacon

in 1872 and a priest in 1875. In 1874, he married Frances Cunningham, the daughter of the Vicar of Witney, who was a notable High Church man. This was a commitment that seemed to suggest for Acland a settled future in an Anglican High Church calling; however, the following year he accepted the position of Principal at the recently established Oxford Military School at Cowley. During his brief two-year tenure of this position, Acland formed a close friendship with Cyril Ransome (later to become a Professor at Leeds), with whom he co-authored the *Handbook in Outline of the Political History of England*, a much-applauded work of reference which became popularly known as 'the Acland and Ransome'.

It was also during this formative period (in his own words, 'the saddest and yet most vitally necessary part of his life')² that Acland underwent a crucial change in his religious opinions: a conscious, positive decision to renounce holy orders to pursue a secular career, in public life or politics, which eventually led, in 1879, to his retirement from holy orders under the Clerical Disabilities Relief Act of 1870. The experience proved a heart-rending wrench and led to a long, painful rift with his distraught father and other members of his family – most of whom, as staunch, committed Anglicans, had expected him to spend his whole life in holy orders. In

Acland spent his boyhood in an atmosphere of intense educational activity.

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some cases the breach was never healed; so potent a force was the strong Anglican tradition in his family that retirement from holy orders in this way was viewed as an unforgivable lapse.

In 1877 Acland was appointed Steward of Christ Church (an office styled 'Junior Bursar' in the other Oxford colleges), which was then under the rule of Dean Liddell. He also served as the first Treasurer of Somerville College, founded during the era of the women's societies at Oxford, and in 1884 he was appointed Senior Bursar of Balliol College in succession to Arnold Toynbee who had died suddenly. In all these positions he built up an enviable reputation for sound, efficient administration.

During these frenzied years at Oxford, Acland also assumed charge, from 1878, of the new scheme of University Extension Lectures, originally initiated at Cambridge University and soon emulated at Oxford. In 1882 he succeeded T. H. Green as chairman of the Oxford Delegation for Extension Lectures. This activity brought him into contact with the working classes of the north of England.

He also became active in the work of the Co-operative movement, especially within Lancashire and Yorkshire, and it was he who was mainly responsible for bringing the Co-operative Congress to Oxford in 1882. Two years later he wrote, together with his friend Benjamin Jones, *Working Men Co-operators: What they have done and what they are doing* (1884). On becoming a member of the Central Co-operative Board, he was particularly proud when, in the alphabetical list of occupations of its members, between the items '1 Bricklayer' and '1 Carpenter', he wrote '1 Bursar of an Oxford College'.³

Within the Co-operative movement Arthur Acland worked in close association with Arnold Toynbee, the young disciple of T. H. Green and champion of the philosophy of

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Idealism. During his years as an undergraduate and member of the university's staff at Oxford, Acland had come heavily under their influence. His concern for the welfare of declining rural communities led him to embrace Green's concept of 'active citizenship' as the means of creating a new social order based on co-operation and social justice. He came to share with Green, too, the view that education was the most potent moral force in society. In 1876, the two men shared a lengthy holiday at Florence; by his return Acland had become convinced that he wished to dedicate his life to the concept of service in the secular community. From this came his decision to renounce holy orders in 1879.

The combination of Acland's University Extension work, together with his work as an active lecturer for the Co-operative movement throughout the north of England, particularly in the industrial communities of Lancashire and the West Riding of Yorkshire, eventually led, in 1885, to his nomination as the Liberal candidate for the Rotherham division. This was a new parliamentary constituency created by the Redistribution Act of the same year. Here a heavily industrialised electorate, comprising mainly miners, returned him to parliament by a majority of three to one (6301 votes to 2258), and thereafter remained loyal to him until he retired from parliament in 1899. Although Rotherham was a county constituency, it was almost totally industrialised and over half the population lived in the borough of Rotherham itself. Coal mining was by far the predominant industry in the constituency, although the town of Rotherham also contained iron, steel and other heavy industries. The agricultural vote was almost negligible. It was, as a result, far and away the safest Liberal seat in the area. Acland was again to poll substantial majorities in 1886 and 1892, and

was thereafter returned unopposed to parliament.

At the Home Rule split in 1886 Acland predictably did not waver in his allegiance to Gladstone. His background meant that he was at once hailed at Westminster as an acknowledged authority on educational matters. As one of his obituaries claimed after his death, 'In the House of Commons he made his way without any kind of self-advertisement, but his influence grew without it being generally recognised. He was by no means an eloquent speaker, but he had dignity, an excellent voice, a good Parliamentary manner, and never opened his lips unless he thoroughly knew his facts'.⁴

The general election of 1885 proved to be a watershed in the history of the Liberal Party in several ways. A new generation of Liberal politicians now sat at Westminster, foremost among them Acland, Asquith, Edward Grey and R. B. Haldane, all of whom, in the words of veteran Liberal John Morley, possessed 'the temper of men of the world and the temper of business. They had conscience, character, and [they] took their politics to heart'. To their number was soon added other rising stars of the Liberal firmament, such as Augustine Birrell, Sydney Buxton and Thomas Edward Ellis. Meetings of these men, wrote Morley, were characterised by 'a fertility, stimulation, and life in them that was refreshing after remainder biscuit on the one hand, and quackeries on the other, and it was of better omen'.⁵

Acland formed a very close friendship with Thomas Edward Ellis, elected Liberal MP for Merionethshire in 1886, and applauded the outcome of the first county council elections in January 1889 which saw Liberal majorities in all the Welsh counties save Brecknockshire. Acland wrote to Liberal Party organiser Sir Robert Hudson, 'The Welsh national feeling is very strongly brought out by these county council elections'.⁶ In fact both

Acland and a 26-year-old, up-and-coming solicitor by the name of David Lloyd George were immediately chosen aldermen of the Caernarfonshire County Council in recognition of their immense contribution to the recent local election campaign. As the owner of a home at Clynnog in the county since 1880, Arthur Acland had fully integrated himself into the local community and local events, had made an array of friends and acquaintances in Wales (among them Thomas Edward Ellis and Lloyd George), and had fervently embraced Welsh issues, including the land question, disestablishment of the Welsh church and, above all, education.

Education remained his overwhelming concern. He collected extensive evidence on the state of educational provision in Caernarfonshire and became one of the foremost sponsors of the pioneering 1889 Welsh Intermediate Education Act which anticipated Balfour's 1902 Education Act in England in making the Welsh county councils an educational authority. Acland became the first chairman of the Caernarfonshire Joint Education Committee. He was also one of the forces behind the passage of the Technical Instruction Act of the same year. He took a justifiable pride in the role that he had played in securing the election of Lloyd George to parliament in a by-election in the Caernarfon Boroughs in April 1890 – by the tiny majority of just eighteen votes.

Inevitably during these years the primary focus of Liberal policy was the party's preoccupation with the Irish Home Rule question, which tended to dwarf all other issues and demands. For an idealistic, conviction politician like Acland – fully committed to striving to secure the betterment of society – the course of events was heartbreaking: 'How dark it all looks for the moment,' lamented a disillusioned Acland to his friend T. E. Ellis. 'The Old Man [Gladstone] with no interest

in a domestic programme – our other leaders doubtful & if one may [say] so rather ignorant as to what should come next. We want a man with Chamberlain's gifts to stir our Radicalism a bit'.⁷

By this time, the lifespan of the Salisbury administration, elected back in 1886, was drawing to a close and attention inevitably began to focus on the ministerial personnel of the next Liberal government, should the party succeed at the polls. In August, Arthur Acland resolved, rather reluctantly, to sell his home at Clynnog and settle in Scarborough. The experience, he readily admitted, was 'rather distressing. It has been a dear little home and it seems very sad to uproot it. To enjoy home in Parliamentary life, that home must be in the country – Parliament kills "hominess" and sickens one of London'.⁸

'Both Acland and Ellis were very remarkable men' wrote J. A. Spender in his account of the heated debates, notably on education, during late 1891 and early 1892.⁹ As the next general election drew closer, Acland and Ellis, in keeping with many other Liberal MPs, were compelled to consider seriously their likely response should ministerial office be offered to them in the next Liberal administration. In his reminiscences Acland refers to their 'constantly discussing the question whether he and I ought to take office'.¹⁰ 'I feel more than ever persuaded that I mean to refuse office – come what may,' wrote Acland in his diary at the beginning of the year. 'It seems almost like a fixed idea in my mind now. We shall see how the Session which begins on Thursday will affect my determination'.¹¹

He had initially felt that being a backbencher would give him more freedom to exert pressure on a future Liberal government for the causes in which he believed so passionately. By April, however, he had already modified his views considerably, suggesting to Tom Ellis that Ellis might become junior

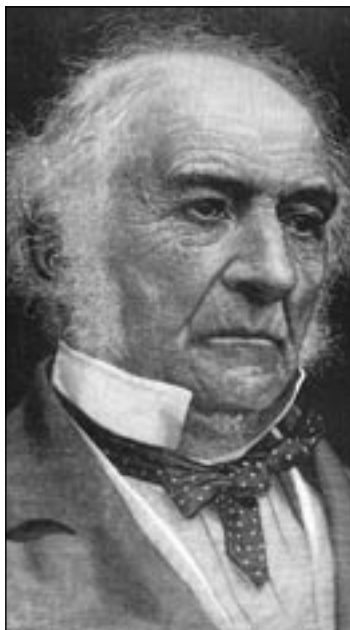
whip in the next government while he himself should accept the position of Chief Whip. He depicted these posts as a welcome opportunity to exert pressure on the government, and potentially more rewarding than ministerial positions within departments.¹² Acland's 'fateful letter', confessed Ellis to Sir Robert Hudson, had left him nonplussed: 'It is perplexing me much and I have not yet found light'.¹³ Ellis's heartfelt 'torturing perplexities about the matter', which had extended back to at least the previous autumn, increased as Acland continued to subject him to mounting pressure.¹⁴

Ellis's evident reluctance to commit himself to a definite course of action was, claimed Acland, 'the heaviest of blows in connection with public life or private friendship that I have up to now experienced in my life'.¹⁵ Following two intensive interviews with John Morley on the subject of accepting office in general, and of his becoming 'Head Whip' in particular, Acland confessed to finding it 'all very puzzling and formidable and responsible. The question of health is very vital'.¹⁶ 'Serious talks' followed with political soulmates Asquith, Edward Grey, Hudson, T. E. Ellis and others: 'Unless we young men *if* we take office are very clear as to under what conditions we go in, we may make a great mess of it. Ellis would be loyal and true – a great help. It is most difficult to know what to do'.¹⁷

At the end of the day, the Liberal majority in the Commons was just forty seats (355, including the Irish MPs, to 315), much smaller than generally expected. In the allocation of ministerial positions, however, the arrangement reached before the election conspicuously broke down. Tom Ellis did indeed become junior whip (following intense pressure from English politicians like Morley and Sir William Harcourt and against the advice of almost all his fellow Welsh MPs), but Acland was, perhaps unexpectedly, given

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Acland's leaders and friends; Gladstone, Ellis and Rosebery.



the position of Vice-President of the Council of Education with a seat in the Cabinet. Acland's appointment was generally well received in Wales; he had a long record of constant support for the Welsh education movement, and was sympathetic to intermediate education schemes, calls for a national university and the teaching of Welsh in schools. In addition, he had consistently supported the campaign for Welsh disestablishment.¹⁸

The appointment of Acland, whom he viewed as 'the son of the oldest of all the surviving friends of his youth, Sir Thomas Acland', also gave enormous personal satisfaction to the ageing Gladstone.¹⁹ Although he was now in his eighty-third year, Gladstone still shared a close rapport with the younger, more radical members of his Cabinet. Asquith and Acland, in particular, represented the progressive, public-spirited generalists that Gladstone's Oxford University Act of 1854 had been designed to produce. Acland's father, Sir Thomas Acland, had been a contemporary of Gladstone's at Christ Church, Oxford; both had been captivated by High Church Liberalism. Gladstone had also looked approvingly at Acland's work as Steward of Christ Church in the 1880s, and in particular at his key role in expanding extra-mural activities – which had been of much interest to the Prime Minister back in the 1840s and 1850s.²⁰

A Cabinet seat for the Vice-President was a notable innovation, giving its holder an unprecedented complete control of the department, while Lords Kimberley and Rosebery were to represent it in the Lords. After the appointments had been finalised, Acland and Ellis, accompanied by D. R. Daniel and J. Herbert Lewis, departed on another continental tour, returning home via Zurich. More than forty years later the Liberal MP for Flintshire, Sir Herbert Lewis, by then a bedridden invalid, recalled their experiences:

We were on our way home from a delightful visit to the Austrian Tyrol & were shown all the principal educational institutions at Zurich, which was then as now regarded as an example to other cities.

But the most remarkable thing we saw was a tiny upper room – almost a garret – where a kind, fatherly old German Swiss was teaching half a dozen defective children. I do not know whether this was the first experiment of the kind or whether I stood by the cradle of the education of the feeble-minded, but I certainly stood by its cradle as far as Britain was concerned for the old teacher's methods so impressed Acland that he started special teaching for the feeble minded immediately after reaching home.²¹

At the time of Acland's death in 1926, one of his obituaries stated: 'Many competent judges believe that he was one of the best Ministers of Education the country ever had'.²² His Cabinet rank enabled him to have great influence on the Treasury, and his tenure of office was characterised by an expert knowledge of education and respect for the teaching profession at all levels. Acland worked in tandem with Sir George Kekewich, permanent secretary in the Department, and two important acts were passed during his term of office: the Elementary Education (Blind and Deaf Children) Act and the Elementary Education (School Attendance) Act, both enacted in 1893. The latter measure raised the age of total or partial exemption to eleven. Soon, favouring results by administration rather than legislation, Acland introduced the Evening Continuation School Code of 1893, which transformed the status of night schools and laid the foundation for an enhanced system of adult education. He abhorred the 'payment by results' system practised at the time. Other achievements included the reorganisation of the Science and Art Department

at South Kensington, the opening up of the schools inspectorate to suitably qualified, certified teachers, and the setting up of a new department for special inquiries and reports.

In January 1893 Arthur Acland also issued the famous Circular 321 that instructed inspectors to submit a report to the Education Department about the condition of buildings and apparatus in every public elementary school. This provoked an immediate storm of protest from the advocates of voluntary schools; Acland was at once dubbed ‘the “heretic”, the “apostate”, the “secularist” who was seeking to undermine the educational influence of the Church which he has “betrayed”’.²³ Country clergy, in particular, loathed the new policy and pointed to the ‘intolerable strain’ which it entailed. Some more prescient churchmen, however, saw the innovation as a means of ensuring the greater efficiency of voluntary schools. Acland’s difficulties were exacerbated by the fact that his government never enjoyed a majority of more than forty seats in the House, and by Gladstone’s great age and eventual ‘early’ retirement in 1894.

More generally, Acland was considered one of the Cabinet ministers most sympathetic to the aspirations of Labour and Socialism. Lord Morley recalled him as one who had the reputation of ‘keeping in touch with the Labour people and their mind’.²⁴ When Gladstone eventually resolved to stand down in 1894, Morley considered Acland, together with Asquith, Earl Spencer and himself, to have constituted ‘the leading junta inside the Cabinet’ who pressed for the selection of Lord Rosebery rather than Sir William Harcourt to be the new Liberal leader.²⁵

But by this time the health of both Acland and his wife was deteriorating, a difficulty accentuated by his growing disillusionment with political life in general and the Liberal Party in particular. Battered by an array of

problems as Education Minister throughout the long months of 1893, he shared with many other radicals a frustration at their government’s failure to introduce reforming measures designed to improve the lot of their fellow countrymen. Towards the end of the year he revealed his feelings to Thomas Edward Ellis:

Our position in politics seems to be so strange. Are we straining ourselves and spending so much time to any real purpose? No time is left to think on human affairs or human improvement ... and all is choked with petty and narrow & personal details ... It is a miserably poor way to spend our lives unless we are really working for something which is *real* – some real victories over the vile and the cross grained and the retrogressive in the world’s affairs.²⁶

His anxiety about the political prospects was compounded by his ‘grave anxiety at home about my wife. She has just undergone a serious operation.’²⁷ His own health, too, was steadily deteriorating, so that by the spring of 1895 he was conspicuously failing to contribute as much as he wished to political and public life.

Acland suffered from severe psychological problems which led to a long series of nervous breakdowns and eventually culminated in a major breakdown in 1898. He was consequently unable to handle stress and responsibility, a factor which rendered it impossible for him to accept office thereafter. There was also an element of hypochondria in his make-up. ‘I am a lame dog. I still feel very weak,’ he wrote to Tom Ellis from Kington, Herefordshire, in April 1895. ‘It has been a hateful spring. I wish it would all make an end & that we could go to the country.’²⁸ ‘Our friend Acland does not pick up much,’ wrote John E. Ellis, Liberal MP for the Rushcliffe division, to Tom Ellis in July after dining

with Acland, ‘He sat a good deal after [dinner] with his head on his hand & seems to have little recuperative power. They *talk* of leaving Scarbro ... He talks very despondently!’²⁹ By the end of the year Acland confessed to his diary:

Can we wonder that we say E[lsie, his wife] and I sometimes we will not be slaves to politics for the rest of our lives and sometimes think that after 5 years i.e. when next general election comes I will retire.

I see no great political cause which I can practically assist in the next ten years and by that time I shall be nearly sixty if I live. I think another three years of real office would kill me and to have an ornamental office would be disgusting after what I did before. No, we will carefully consider all this and not be hastily overpersuaded from what seems best.³⁰

In the general election of July 1895 the Liberal Party was heavily defeated at the polls, returning only 177 MPs to Westminster as opposed to 411 Unionists. It was decimated in England and appeared to be relegated largely to the ‘Celtic fringe’. Acland was again returned unopposed for his Rotherham constituency (as had also happened in August 1892 when he was forced to stand for re-election following his appointment to the Cabinet).

As 1896 ran its course he felt little better. At the height of the summer he wrote to Ellis, ‘I am a good deal depressed about my health and the future as far as I am concerned’.³¹ Three months later Lord Rosebery’s sudden resignation as Liberal Party leader threw Acland into deep despair. Again he poured out his emotions to Tom Ellis:

It is rather sad for us and men like us with the hopes we brought into public life from Oxford and our homes to have found that those we have earnestly desired to uphold & follow

‘Are we straining ourselves and spending so much time to any real purpose? No time is left to think on human affairs or human improvement ... and all is choked with petty and narrow & personal details.’

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have through the grave defects you mention given us such a bad time. And of course it must infect the future. All this uncertainty and absence of leading will make more & more pure individualism & anyone will think that to upset the party a bit is not so great a matter.³²

Rosebery's many followers were at once bereft of a leader. Acland also despaired of securing effective leadership from Sir William Harcourt, leader of the Liberal Party in the House of Commons: 'Harcourt's H[ouse] of C[ommons] qualities are great & notable but he has always been a "hand to mouth" man and always will be'.³³

The party hierarchy was, without a doubt, characterised by a pitiful dearth of ideas at this critical juncture. Policy development had fallen into abeyance, organisation had lapsed and party leaders tended simply to voice opposition to whatever policy initiatives came from the Tory camp.³⁴ Indeed, 'followers blamed leaders, and leaders blamed followers for the disorganised state of Liberal politics. Neither side seemed prepared to grasp responsibility for the positive work of reorientation and reconstruction'.³⁵

'I wish the outlook was good for us,' wrote Acland pathetically in response to a New Year greeting from Ellis. 'Things are so bad with us, my wife really not having managed any solid food properly for nearly 3 months ... Politics in places even like Rotherham are going to be more & more puzzling & difficult every year.'³⁶ Although he was more than willing to help behind the scenes, his indifferent health meant that he could no longer commit himself to delivering public speeches.³⁷ There was good reason for his anxiety to retire. 'Acland ill. Quite broken down, Poor Chap', lamented Lloyd George to his brother William in January 1898.³⁸

By July it was known that he planned to retire from parliament.

'I am deeply grieved to think that Acland is retiring from Parliament,' wrote Frank Edwards, Liberal MP for Radnorshire, to J. Herbert Lewis. 'It is a material loss, especially so in view of the troublesome times that are before us over elementary schools. He has great capability, great energy & a safe seat. To have to relinquish this work at his age must be indeed a blow to him.'³⁹

Acland's mental state had deteriorated still further as a result of the death of his father the previous month; this had increased his determination to announce to his Rotherham constituents his intention to stand down and thus cause a by-election.⁴⁰ 'It must mean I fear so much separation between us two who have been accustomed to live like brothers at intervals for years,' wrote Acland to Ellis. He was disheartened still further by the news that Ellis's health, never robust, had apparently declined during the months following his marriage and by the realisation that they were now likely to meet much less often in years to come. Acland was himself unsure where he and his wife might now settle in future; a hankering to return to north Wales remained.⁴¹

In a sense, the fall of the Liberal government in 1895 had come too late to save Acland's health. He had, indeed, been gravely shaken by his experience of office. Under Lord Rosebery, Acland had been a member of the 'inner circle' of the Liberal Cabinet and a telling influence especially on industrial issues such as the setting up of a Labour Department and the negotiations for the Prime Minister's arbitration in the coal strike. Eventually he was to retire from parliament in 1899.

Although no longer in parliament, Acland still kept in close touch with the Liberal Party and the Board of Education. Active political life held but little attraction for him as the twentieth century dawned. In 1902 he was prominent in the campaign of opposition to Balfour's

Education Act, but grew more and more disillusioned by the 'perpetual emphasising of differences' within the Liberal Party by Grey and Asquith.⁴² 'Do you still think we are going to have a Liberal Government next time?' he asked his Welsh associate D. R. Daniel despondently in August. 'I fear my health will never enable me to return to Parliament.'⁴³ He derived much comfort and solace from preparing a memoir to his father Sir Thomas Dyke-Acland, a work of filial piety, privately printed, which appeared at the end of 1902.⁴⁴ Many correspondents, Rosebery and Daniel among them, wrote to Acland to express their admiration. Political life, he readily admitted, he now found 'rather depressing on the whole', but he hoped that Wales would take the lead in the battle against the Education Act.⁴⁵ Lord Rendel still considered him to be 'a true friend of Wales'.⁴⁶

Health problems persisted. In the spring of 1905, Acland wrote to D. R. Daniel, 'As we get older we don't get stronger but struggle along somehow'.⁴⁷ Before the end of the same year, however, a Liberal government under Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman was formed, following a period of more than a decade in opposition. Natural political animal as he was, Acland began to tend to rue his decision to retire from Westminster, writing to Campbell-Bannerman on the last day of November 'I sometimes think I might be of some use to you in the Lords (this is not an early application for an honour!) ... It is very hard that there is not some more easy & pleasant way in which the animal that is out at grass could be brought in to do some light work'.⁴⁸

He was to prove instrumental in persuading Sir Edward Grey, a close personal friend, to accept the position of Foreign Secretary. Acland, it would seem, had been brought to London at this point by king-maker J. A. Spender specifically to exert 'moral pressure' on Grey and Haldane to

'He has great capability, great energy & a safe seat. To have to relinquish this work at his age must be indeed a blow to him.'

accept the Foreign Office and the War Office respectively. Acland impressed upon Grey that Rosebery would have no part in this new ministry and that he had a moral duty not to imperil the future of his party and the cause of free trade by reviving old political feuds on the eve of a general election.

‘Do you see me in a vision comfortably seated in the House of Lords?’ he enquired of Daniel as an eventful year drew to a close. ‘I am not *very* sanguine about the General Election. I *doubt* if a Liberal Ministry should have been formed before Dissolution.’⁴⁹ Somewhat wistfully Acland seemed to regret that, now the promised land was at last in sight, he himself seemed destined to remain on the sidelines. He may have considered the possibility of a return to front-line politics at this point, but such wishful thinking was destined to remain a pipe dream.

He remained to some extent an elder statesman of the Liberal Party, and a respected authority on educational matters, serving briefly as president of the consultative committee to the Board of Education.⁵⁰ In 1908, contrary to expectations, he emphatically refused a peerage. He continued to correspond with a number of senior Liberal Party politicians and ventured to London quite often.⁵¹ Health problems, however, persisted.⁵² His effective political swansong came in 1912 when he was chosen to chair the investigating committee into the land question, which had been set up by Lloyd George, as Chancellor of the Exchequer, to some extent as part of a personal crusade to ‘regenerate rural England’.

His appointment was generally welcomed, as he was a former Cabinet minister and the son of an eleventh baronet with landed connections, known to hold progressive views on these issues. Even hostile Liberals appeared now to accept the view that the enquiry chaired by Acland was a fact-collecting mission rather than an assault on landlordism.

And some Unionist critics were brought into line by their respect for Acland.⁵³ But the sense of approval was not universal. Soon after Acland’s appointment, the committee’s secretary wrote to Lloyd George ‘You have given us a somewhat difficult task by making Acland our chairman. I think, if I may say so, that it was a most admirable choice, and I have the greatest respect & admiration for him; and we are determined to do all we can to carry him with us. But a *Times* leading article (of all things) is enough to terrify him.’⁵⁴ Ill health and advancing years had certainly taken their toll.

In February 1919 Acland succeeded his brother as thirteenth baronet. In a 1925 letter to a Welsh researcher, George M. Ll. Davies, Acland, in shaky handwriting, painted a sad picture of the closing years of his life: ‘I have reached the stage in old age when memory is *extremely* deceptive. What with asthma and headaches & very shaky legs I am no longer very fit for writing. Wish I could do more – My wife is very seriously out of health wh is very sad for us both. I never leave the house except for a very short walk within a garden opposite.’⁵⁵

When he died in London on 9 October 1926, he was remembered primarily as one of the last survivors of Gladstone’s Cabinet ministers, only four other of whom then remained: Rosebery, Asquith (by then Lord Oxford), Sir George Trevelyan and Lord Eversley.⁵⁶ Paying tribute to his friend while speaking at Nottingham, Lord Grey said: ‘The influence of Sir Arthur Acland among the young Liberal members of Parliament in the early days was most remarkable and exceptional. He was absolutely free from class thought and feeling, a really free-minded man, and he desired to see the whole organizations of this country made thoroughly democratic from top to bottom’.⁵⁷

Acland and his wife had two sons and one daughter. He was

‘He was absolutely free from class thought and feeling, a really free-minded man, and he desired to see the whole organizations of this country made thoroughly democratic from top to bottom’.

succeeded as fourteenth baronet by his elder and only surviving son Francis Dyke Acland (born 1874).

Arthur Herbert Dyke Acland is today largely a forgotten man. He retired from active politics at the relatively very young age of 52. But his achievements in the field of education from 1892 to 1895 were real and, like H. H. Asquith, he was one of the few Liberal ‘rising star’ politicians whose reputation was actually enhanced by participation in the last Gladstone administration. A combination of long-term ill health and disillusionment with politics prevented his re-emergence in 1905–06 when he might have made a real contribution to the Liberal governments of Campbell-Bannerman and Asquith. Like so many talented politicians, he may indeed have been ‘a lost prime minister’.

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- 1 The phrase is that used in Acland’s obituary in *The Times*, 11 October 1926, p. 14, col. b.
- 2 Cited in his obituary in the *Manchester Guardian*, 11 October 1926, p. 6.
- 3 *Ibid.*
- 4 *Ibid.*
- 5 John, Viscount Morley, *Recollections* (London, 1917), vol. 1, pp. 323–24.
- 6 Acland to Hudson, 26 January 1889, cited in J. A. Spender, *Sir Robert Hudson: a Memoir* (London, 1930), p. 22.
- 7 National Library of Wales (hereafter NLW), T. E. Ellis Papers 23, Acland to Ellis, 1 January 1891.
- 8 NLW MS 23,240E (the Diary of A. H. D. Acland, 1871–98), p. 114, diary entry for 13 August 1891.
- 9 Cited in T. I. Ellis, *Thomas Edward Ellis, Cofiant, Cyfrol II (1886–1899)* (Liverpool, 1948), pp. 177–78.
- 10 NLW, T. E. Ellis Papers 2,987, reminiscences of Ellis by A. H. D. Acland.
- 11 NLW MS 23,240E, pp. 115–16, diary entry for 7 February 1892.
- 12 NLW, T. E. Ellis Papers 3,220–21, Acland to Ellis, 14 and 22 April 1892.

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- 13 T. E. Ellis to Sir Robert Hudson (May 1892), cited in Neville Masterman, *The Forerunner: the Dilemmas of Tom Ellis, 1859–1899* (Llandybie, 1972), p. 179.
- 14 The phrase is that used in NLW, D. R. Daniel Papers 397, Ellis to Daniel, 23 May 1892.
- 15 NLW, T. E. Ellis Papers 3,222, Acland to Ellis, 17 May 1892.
- 16 NLW MS 23,240E, p. 116, diary entry for 2 April 1892.
- 17 Ibid., diary entry for 8 April 1892.
- 18 See Kenneth O. Morgan, *Wales in British Politics, 1868–1922*, 4th edn. (Cardiff, 1991), pp. 121–22; NLW, Rendel Papers 992, Acland to Rendel, 21 August 1892: 'I have received many kind letters from Wales'.
- 19 John Morley, *The Life of Gladstone* (London, 1908) vol. 3, pp. 494–95.
- 20 See H. C. G. Matthew, *Gladstone, 1875–1898* (Oxford, 1995), p. 331.
- 21 NLW MS 21,818E, f. 391, Sir John Herbert Lewis to Ivor Davies, 15 September 1933.
- 22 Cited in his obituary in the *Manchester Guardian*, 11 October 1926, p. 6.
- 23 Cited *ibid.*
- 24 Morley, *Recollections*, vol. 1, p. 324.
- 25 Ibid., vol. 2, p. 15.
- 26 NLW, T. E. Ellis Papers 38, Acland to Ellis, 23 December 1893.
- 27 NLW, A. J. Williams Papers A3/4, Acland to Williams, 28 October 1894.
- 28 NLW, T. E. Ellis Papers 40, Acland to Ellis, 18 April 1895.
- 29 Ibid. 3,374, John E. Ellis MP, Scarborough, to Ellis, 21 July 1895.
- 30 NLW MS 23,240E, p. 128, diary entry for Christmas 1895. See also NLW, T. E. Ellis Papers 3,226, Acland to Ellis, 7 November 1895.
- 31 Ibid. 42, Acland to Ellis, 11 July 1896.
- 32 Ibid. 44, Acland to Ellis, 15 October 1896 ('Confidential').
- 33 Ibid.
- 34 See the analysis in D. A. Hamer, *Liberal Politics in the age of Gladstone and Rosebery: A Study in Leadership and Policy* (Oxford, 1972), pp. 238–39.
- 35 Ibid., pp. 245–46.
- 36 NLW, T. E. Ellis Papers 45, Acland to Ellis, 2 January 1897.
- 37 Ibid. 48, Acland to Ellis, 15 August 1897.
- 38 NLW, William George Papers 552, D. Lloyd George to William George, 21 January 1898.
- 39 NLW, Sir John Herbert Lewis Papers A1/100, Frank Edwards, Bath, to Lewis, 11 July 1898.
- 40 NLW, T. E. Ellis Papers 52, Acland to Ellis, 12 June 1898 ('Private').
- 41 Ibid. 53, Acland to Ellis, 14 August 1898.
- 42 National Library of Scotland, Rosebery Papers, box 76, Acland to Rosebery, undated [?1901].
- 43 NLW, D. R. Daniel Papers 614, Acland to Daniel, 19 August 1902.
- 44 A. H. D. Acland, *Sir Thomas Dyke-Acland: a Memoir and Letters* (Scarborough, 1902).
- 45 NLW, D. R. Daniel Papers 615, Acland to Daniel, 15 January 1903.
- 46 F. E. Hamer (ed.), *The Personal Papers of Lord Rendel* (London, 1931), p. 286.
- 47 NLW, D. R. Daniel Papers 623, Acland to Daniel, 13 March 1905.
- 48 Acland to Campbell-Bannerman, 30 November 1905, cited in John Wilson, *C.B.: a Life of Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman* (London, 1973), p. 439. Reflecting on his retirement from parliament seven years earlier, he commented, 'I overstrained my brain when I was about five and twenty ... & there's not much left now'.
- 49 NLW, D. R. Daniel Papers 616, Acland to Daniel, 29 December 1905 ('Private').
- 50 NLW, William George Papers 3,402, D. Lloyd George to Richard Lloyd, 15 June 1906.
- 51 NLW MS 20,463C, no. 2,393, Acland to D. Lloyd George, 16 September 1909 ('Confidential').
- 52 NLW MS 22,522C, f. 165, Acland to D. Lloyd George, 7 August 1910 ('Private').
- 53 See Ian Packer, *Lloyd George, Liberalism and the Land: the Land Issue and Party Politics in England, 1906–1914* (London, 2001), p. 84.
- 54 Parliamentary Archive, House of Lords Record Office, Lloyd George Papers C/2/1/6, C. Roden Buxton to D. Lloyd George, 11 August 1912.
- 55 NLW, George M. Ll. Davies Papers 3,220, Acland to Davies, 17 February 1925 ('Private').
- 56 *The Times*, 11 October 1926, p. 21, col. c.
- 57 Ibid., 13 October 1926, p. 7, col. e.

REPORT

Clement Davies – Liberal Party saviour?

Fringe meeting report, September 2003, Brighton, with Alun Wyburn-Powell, Dr David Roberts and Roger Williams MP.

Report by **Graham Lippiatt**

When I joined the Liberal Party in 1972, Clement Davies was already a largely forgotten man to the vast majority of party members. Yet this was only ten years after his death and just sixteen since he had led the party – the equivalent to looking back today to the run-up to Paddy Ashdown's leadership of the merged Liberal Democrats. It was as if the contemporary Liberal Party had been born again in the Grimond years, and what had gone before was consigned to dust and irrelevance.

If one of the purposes of the Liberal Democrat History Group is to help make visible aspects and personalities of Liberal history that were previously ignored or marginalised, then the re-emergence of interest in Clement Davies is a particular achievement. In recent years Davies has been rediscovered and rehabilitated. It has been shown that the seeds of the Liberal Party's revival, brought to full bloom under Jo Grimond, were firmly planted in the Davies era. In addition, interest in Davies' other achievements, his